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Understanding Corporate Criminal Careers: Insights From a Systematic Narrative Review of Longitudinal Studies

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ABSTRACT

In a systematic narrative review of 33 longitudinal corporate crime studies, we identify and describe corporate criminal career dimensions: participation, frequency, crime mix, and duration. Themes and patterns across data sources are assessed, including information collected that informs a corporate criminal career perspective and what remains unexamined. Main findings reveal: (1) most longitudinal studies do not explicitly focus on the corporate criminal career; (2) a significant number of companies offend occasionally over time, but others offend often (chronically) or not at all; (3) typically, studies examine one or two types of offending, offering little insight into crime mix; and (4) identifiable groups of corporations show evidence of both stability and change over time. Studies provide insights for understanding the dimensions of corporate criminal careers (some more than others), but more explicit and detailed longitudinal work is needed. We conclude by identifying potential areas for theoretical advances and future research.

1 | Introduction

Criminal career research is one of the fundamentals of contemporary criminology. An important contribution and starting point is the final report of the Panel on Research on Criminal Careers convened by the National Academy of Sciences in the 1980s (Blumstein et al. 1986). This research launched the criminal career paradigm and challenged criminologists to focus their research questions on the longitudinal patterning of criminal offending over the life-course (Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2007). The criminal career paradigm offers researchers a conceptual framework for systematically charting the trajectories of criminal behavior across an individual's life span, while deliberately refraining from adherence to any specific theoretical interpretation (Blokland et al. 2021; Blumstein and Cohen 1987). As the paradigm developed, researchers focused on the dynamics of continuity and change in offending patterns over time (Laub and Sampson 1993), emphasizing factors that give rise to and disrupt an ongoing criminal career.

Understanding these processes and patterns informs both theoretical development (etiology) and intervention strategies (policy) which are central goals for the field. Similarly, our purpose here is to draw on longitudinal corporate offending research to illuminate how a criminal career approach can provide important insights into offending patterns and show how these insights can inform crime prevention and control and theoretical applications—specifically, organizational life-cycle approaches. Although these theories do not incorporate or address illegality per se as a key concept or developmental element as organizations shift, change, and stabilize over time, they can provide a meaningful framework in which to analyze corporate offending patterns.

The criminal career paradigm has focused mostly on individual offenders who engage in conventional crime or, less commonly, white-collar offending (Weisburd et al. 1990; Piquero and Weisburd 2009; van der Onna et al. 2014). Blumstein et al. (1986) thought that any sequence of crimes, no matter

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how small or short in duration, constituted a criminal career. Unfortunately, relatively few studies explicitly have tied the approach to corporate offenders (see, e.g., Hunter 2021), and, as a consequence, the subfield has not benefited from a deeper understanding of continuity and change in corporate offending patterns or when and under what circumstances interventions are apt to be successful.

In this study, we expand and apply the criminal career paradigm to corporate offenders by conducting a systematic narrative review of existing longitudinal corporate crime studies from Europe, Australia, and the United States. Several studies analyzed in this research originate from regulatory enforcement agencies. Early regulatory enforcement researchers positioned the study of enforcement practices as a central topic in which understanding the motivations of corporate offenders for offending and non-offending was very important (Braithwaite and Makkai 1991; Hawkins 1983; Grabosky and Braithwaite 1986; Haines 1997; Kagan and Scholz 1984). Since then there is a strong tradition of studying empirical processes of regulatory policy making in different contexts (Almond and van Erp 2020). Thus, regulatory enforcement data offer a particularly suitable empirical context for examining long-term compliance and non-compliance patterns of corporations (Braithwaite 2002; Gunningham et al. 2003; Simpson and Rorie 2011). Additionally, many studies also include criminal and/or civil enforcement data. This plethora of data enriches the empirical landscape from which to build a corporate criminal career paradigm and advance potential strategies to enhance regulation and crime control (Short et al. 2025). Without longitudinal data it is not possible to examine how offending changes within subjects over the criminal career and what factors may be related to such changes (Blokland and Nieuwebeerta 2010). Specifically, we explore what these studies collectively reveal about corporate offending on participation, frequency, crime mix, and duration. What are the risk and protective factors for companies as they develop and change over time? What insights can be gleaned regarding offense types and variety? Can we discern whether corporate offenders are specialists or generalists? We conclude by discussing how our findings may inform regulatory strategy and organizational theories of stability and change as exemplified by organizational life-cycle theories.

This study adopts a narrative approach because data from most corporate crime longitudinal studies are unavailable for secondary data analysis. Plus, a systematic narrative review has several strengths. By assessing and summarizing what is known from extant corporate crime studies, we can provide insights on how longitudinal data can advance the field and inform theory development (Sukhera 2022). Describing the different dimensions of the corporate criminal career can yield useful information for corporate governance structures and regulators. For instance, there may be distinct company characteristics that differentiate chronic offenders from those that offend rarely or aspects associated with downward (as opposed to upward) offending trajectories that could inform both corporate governance systems (as to potential corporate “hotspots” and the strengths and weaknesses of internal control mechanisms) and regulators (on different features of regulatory enforcement). A narrative approach also can help identify strategies for overcoming some measurement limitations identified by critics of longitudinal data

approaches (Claessens et al. 2023; Cullen et al. 2019; Sullivan and McGloin 2014).

2 | The Criminal Career Paradigm and Corporate Criminal Careers

Criminal career research arose when longitudinal data was available on individual offending¹ (Blumstein et al. 1986; Glueck and Glueck 1950; Huizinga et al. 2003; Loeber et al. 2003; Thornberry and Krohn 2003; Wolfgang et al. 1972). It especially focuses on within-individual developments in offending over time (Blokland and Nieuwebeerta 2010). The criminal career paradigm became influential and provided basic conceptual tools to learn more about the patterning of criminal activity over time (Blumstein et al. 1986). The paradigm empirically maps an individual's criminal activity from the first to the last offense (Blumstein et al. 1986), throughout life, without restricting itself to any theoretical explanation (Blumstein and Cohen 1987).

The study of criminal careers should, according to Blumstein et al. (1986), focus on four dimensions: participation (those who commit offenses and those who do not), frequency (the number of committed offenses within a given time period), crime mix (type of offenses committed, including the severity of said offenses), and duration (the time period between offending onset and termination). With longitudinal data, we can investigate when and why people start offending (onset), why and how they continue to commit violations (persistence), if and why offending becomes more serious or specialized (escalation), and why and when people stop committing violations (desistance). Loeber and LeBlanc (1990) added important dimensions, such as age of onset, age of termination, and career duration as boundary dimensions because they represent the temporal confines of offending (Blokland 2005). Piquero (2023) mentions that all these dimensions could be influenced by various risk and protective factors across the entire life-course. Drawing from Sampson and Smith's (2021) work showing that crime is also shaped by historical and social conditions, Piquero (2023) emphasizes the need to pay attention to how cohort patterns are shaped by these conditions, including the effects of interventions (control and regulation) on career development. Comparing cohort studies over time will be a useful strategy to discern these differences. Longitudinal corporate crime data are therefore necessary to discern empirical patterns that correspond to criminal career dimensions and to assess how the socio-legal contexts at different points in time affect risk and protective factors across corporate life phases.

A criminal career approach to corporate crime may appear unconventional at first glance, but it is conceptually more grounded than it initially seems. First, the anthropomorphic treatment of corporations is well-established in organizational sciences, where firms are often conceptualized as decision-making actors possessing traits and behavioral tendencies (Miller and Friesen 1984; Huisman 2016). This perspective is also embedded in corporate criminology, which defines corporate crime (in part) as lawbreaking committed by corporate entities themselves (Braithwaite 1984). In addition to this, in many jurisdictions corporations are recognized as legal persons that can be held liable for violations of laws and regulations,

similar to individual offenders (Laufer 2006). Second, business scholarship has long developed business life-cycle models that delineate various stages in a corporation's development, each characterized by specific organizational challenges and strategic risks (Greiner 1972; Quinn and Cameron 1983; Phelps et al. 2007; Levie and Lichtenstein 2010). These phases may correspond to varying degrees of exposure to regulatory non-compliance or illicit behavior (Hunter 2021; Simpson 2019). Third, longitudinal analyses of corporate crime are not without precedent. In fact, the foundational work of Edwin Sutherland, often regarded as the origin of corporate crime scholarship, relied on regulatory enforcement, criminal and civil data to trace patterns of corporate offending among American corporations (Sutherland 1949/1983). Sutherland (1949/1983) was the first to focus on criminal careers of corporations over a significant period of time. The 70 corporations followed in his research were selected from lists composed in 1929 and 1938 (Chambliss 1984; Sutherland 1949/1983). The average length of coverage for the corporate sample was 45 years. Most companies were convicted of, or found responsible or liable for, at least one violation during the study period and some offended often enough to be considered "chronic" recidivists.

Sutherland adopted a life history approach to analyze corporate violations long before theories emerged in criminology to explain individual criminal careers (Simpson 2019) or organizational life-cycle theories were fully developed by business scholars (Al-Taie and Cater-Steel 2020; Mosca et al. 2021).

2.1 | Dimensions of a Criminal Career

The first key criminal career dimension is *participation*, which can "be measured by a fraction of the population ever committing at least one crime before some age or currently active during some particular observation period" (Piquero et al. 2003, 5). The duration of the data set clearly affects measurement and identification of criminal career concepts. Longer periods are better able to capture participation, persistence, and recidivism. Estimates of participation may differ depending on the reporting method used; self-reports tend to be much higher than official records (Piquero, Moffitt, and Wright 2007). Participation also depends on the type of crimes that are examined; greater participation will be captured if the study focuses on less serious criminal activity (Blokland 2005). It also depends on how participation is defined, the time period utilized, and the characteristics of the sample population (Piquero et al. 2003).

When applying this key dimension to corporations, calculating both the base population (the denominator) and a count of first time or currently active offenders (the numerator) in a crime rate is much more complicated and difficult than with traditional individual offenders (Gibbs and Simpson 2009). Prevalence estimates will differ depending on whether criminal, civil, and/or administrative data sources are utilized.² Corporate offending may be more prevalent in some industries than others (Bradshaw 2015; Clinard and Yeager 1980; Szasz 1986); and more common among larger than smaller firms (Punch 1996). Prevalence will also be affected by how offending is defined and measured, that is, by the type of enforcement action. In the case of individuals, participation can be measured by arrest or

conviction. In the case of corporate offenders, a reasonable comparison would track cases brought (arrest) versus case conclusions (conviction).

The second key criminal career dimension, *frequency*, "also called lambda, refers to the number of crimes committed by an active offender within a given time period" (Blokland 2005, 30). The frequency of individual offending is found to be very skewed and most of the time a minority of offenders are responsible for a disproportionate share of all offenses (Martinez et al. 2017). The value of lambda differs for individual offending frequencies since researchers provide various definitions and operationalizations for offense rate (Spelman 1994). One explanation for the variation in frequency of offending is the different populations in the sample and especially their interactions with the criminal justice system (Piquero et al. 2003). Spelman's (1994) research, for instance, showed that individual offenders spend long periods of time in which they commit no crimes at all. Intermittency of offending is one of the least well documented criminal career parameters (Piquero 2004), and research has shown that some individual offenders have conviction-free intervals but they resume offending after a long time (van Koppen et al. 2020). This recent research emphasizes the importance of longitudinal research data to capture these spells.

Research by Liu et al. (2011), on the other hand, highlights how exposure to criminal justice sanctions can lead to offending escalation (increased seriousness) among individual offenders. When applying the frequency dimension to corporate offending and whether exposure to criminal legal sanctions has an impact on escalation, we should consider that corporations are rarely exposed to criminal justice sanctions (Coffee Jr 2021; Lund and Sarin 2021)—sanctions that are more severe, stigmatizing, and incapacitating than other kinds of legal responses (Sutherland 1949/1983; Clinard and Yeager 1980; Simpson 2019). Instead, firms more typically are subjected to civil and especially regulatory enforcement actions. The former are based on restitutive goals which aim to restore and compensate the victim(s) and not, per se, to sanction the violator. These interventions are less likely to link back to a higher recidivism risk unless there is a punitive dimension added to the case outcome (e.g., treble damages). Regulatory actions generally are geared toward returning the violator to compliant status and thus may lessen or reduce the risk of future offending. However, too much regulatory oversight could lead to offending out of defiance (Braithwaite 2009; Schell-Busey et al. 2016) such as when firms (managers/employees) view regulation as overzealous, burdensome, or unfair (Tyler 2009; Verboon and van Dijke 2012). Also, it is unknown whether and how interactions with the three legal systems (civil, administrative, and criminal) collectively may affect corporate offending patterns. Thus, the frequency dimension and the effect of justice system exposure is more nuanced and complex in the context of the corporate criminal career.

Crime mix, the third key criminal career dimension, refers to the crimes committed which may vary in nature (Block et al. 2006; Piquero et al. 2003; Piquero, Moffitt, and Wright 2007). "The crime mix patterns can be thought of as different groups or classes of offending, where the individuals belonging to that group all share similar patterns of offending styles" (Elliott et al. 2017, 2). It involves the seriousness of the crime type, whether there is escalation

(Liu et al. 2011), and specialization (repetition of the same offense or participation in other types of crime). Farrington et al. (1988) stated that it is important to understand specialization at an early stage to identify which offenses in an individual's criminal career might predict future offenses. Previous studies show that criminal careers of individual offenders tend to be more versatile than specialized—where offenders commit various types of crime instead of concentrating on one type (Blumstein et al. 1988; Britt 1996; DeLisi 2005; Farrington et al. 1988; Loeber and LeBlanc 1990; Piquero et al. 2003; Wolfgang et al. 1972). Generalizing the results of these studies is complicated since researchers have used different conceptualizations of specialization. When applying this key dimension to corporate offending, we observe that it is not only important to capture how often corporations violate rules, but also the specific type of offending, offense seriousness, and whether there is escalation. Insights into these aspects can provide important tools to enforcement agencies in their approach to corporate offending (Wiering et al. 2019) as well as highlight compliance deficiencies intra-organizationally. The degree of specialization in corporate offending refers to the question of whether companies that violate the rules in one type of regulation also violate rules in other areas. If corporations tend to specialize, and therefore violate certain types of rules in particular, the underlying cause must be sought within the framework of that specific violation (Lynam et al. 2004). For example, a corporation may lack the expertise required to comply with specific regulations (Kluin 2014). In that case, the enforcement strategy should also be specific (Hawkins 1984; Kagan and Scholz 1984; Kluin 2014). However, if corporations are characterized by violations of a variety of different rules, it is more likely that the underlying causes are related to cultural or structural characteristics of firms (Huisman 2016) that increase offending opportunities³ or fail to prevent and control illegality when opportunities arise (lack of or insufficient internal compliance mechanisms, cultural social support or incentives for illegality). Observing differences along these lines has important implications for corporate regulation and governance.

Duration, the fourth key criminal career dimension, refers to the time between onset (first offense) and termination (last offense) of offending (Piquero et al. 2003). Only a few long-term prospective longitudinal studies have been carried out for studying the duration of complete criminal careers (Blokland et al. 2005; Blumstein et al. 1982; Jolliffe et al. 2017; Sampson and Laub 2003). Studies on individual offending reveal duration patterns ranging between 5 and 17 years (Piquero et al. 2003) with males having longer criminal careers than females. Visser (2000) found that onset age is related to criminal career duration; an early onset predicted a lengthier criminal career (Farrington et al. 1998; LeBlanc and Fréchette 1989).

Duration of a criminal career naturally depends on whether longitudinal data encompass initiation of first offending. Historical data may include convictions—criminal case outcomes but not arrests. Convictions represent an outcome of a criminal legal process and not necessarily the beginning of a criminal career. As Thornberry and Krohn (2000, 34) point out, “prison data are less useful than court or police data as a measure of actual delinquent or criminal behavior because they are generated not only by the behavior of the perpetrators of offenses, but also by the behavior of police and court officials.” But the length of a criminal career depends largely on the follow-up period of the study (Clinard and Yeager 1980), the

metric in which time is measured, whether offenses are officially discovered or not, and how offenses pattern over the course of time (sporadically, one cluster in time, multiple clusters over time), and the length of the offense (Spelman 1994).

When applying this dimension to corporate offending, given the paucity of self-reported offending data, the duration of the career will be measured by official enforcement actions (e.g., a case is brought against an alleged violator or a case is concluded by a guilty or responsibility determination). Further, most longitudinal studies report their data on a yearly basis and therefore it is unclear if violations occurred in January or December of the same year. A 12-month span of time such as this is problematic as it creates temporal issues with independent variable effects. It also may misspecify offense frequency if the behavior clusters at the end of 1 year and continues into the beginning of another. Another factor to consider is that regulators behave differently than police and prosecutors. In many industries, inspections are mandatory though infrequent. If regulators discover violations during an inspection (especially those of a serious nature), they will return to see if the problem has been remedied—potentially uncovering more violations during the second visit. Thus, one violation or a set of violations at T_1 is sometimes not independent of violations at T_2 and offense or incident counts are likely capturing regulatory enforcement behavior as well as company behavior. Lastly, some corporate offenses can take place over many years. Price-fixing conspiracies, for example, may exist for long periods of time prior to official discovery, with different partners joining or leaving the conspiracy during that time. Although this kind of problem is not unique to corporate crime (e.g., gang activity, non-corporate fraud schemes, long-term abuse and victimization), such offenses challenge crime counts and measures and, consequently, the criminal career dimensions of frequency and duration.

The criminal career paradigm is a first necessary step toward a better understanding of corporate criminal careers (Hunter 2021) and helps to focus researchers and policy makers on evidence-based crime control strategies. Visser (2016) highlights the following reasons. First, understanding criminal career trajectories provides insight into identifying interventions and the timing of those interventions. Second, it is important to incorporate preventive interventions on different levels and aspects. Third, any consideration of sentencing policies should incorporate criminal career dimensions, such as the duration of a criminal career. While the criminal career paradigm shares conceptual roots with the broader life-course perspective in criminology, in this article we focus on the criminal career framework (Blumstein et al. 1986; Piquero et al. 2003). This more targeted approach allows us to examine the four key dimensions of the criminal career paradigm in a structured way. Moreover, life-course theory, with its emphasis on individual-level social bonds, transitions and turning points (Laub and Sampson 1993; Elder 1994) across the criminal career, is not the best framework to contextualize organizational-level patterns and mechanisms. For this reason, we link our findings to organizational life-cycle theory and refer readers to Blokland et al. (2021) for an overview of life-course criminology as applied to corporate offending.

Given our interest in the corporate criminal career, a brief discussion of longitudinal designs in criminology is warranted. In the next section, the strengths and weaknesses of longitudinal

research, particularly as applied to corporate offending, are discussed.

3 | Notes on Longitudinal Design

Depending on the specific characteristics of the design, longitudinal studies allow criminologists to examine the developmental origins and pathways of antisocial behavior, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, and substance abuse. Because the data are dynamic—often following the same subjects and related generations over time (e.g., parent and child), research can track within and between individual patterns of stability and change (attitudinal, behavioral and/or relational) and properly model temporal relationships between independent (risk and protective factors) and dependent variables of interest. Absent longitudinal data, it is more difficult to examine how offending changes over the life-course and what factors may be related to such changes (Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2010). The dynamic design has permitted researchers to pose and answer pivotal questions relating to, among others, (1) intergenerational processes; (2) the relationship between early antisocial conduct and later juvenile and adult crime, or substance abuse; (3) whether certain risk factors (e.g., poor school performance, adult unemployment, and negative health outcomes) are causes or collateral consequences of misconduct; and (4) the impact and consequence of arrest and criminal prosecution. Corporate analogies for these questions might focus on parent corporations and their subsidiaries/facilities (which change over time) or track firms before and after merger activity to evaluate “intergenerational” processes. Comparing offending records of firms as they emerge and develop over time (e.g., organizational life-cycle) can show whether and how offending patterns persist or change as firms age and mature. Like individuals, firms also experience financial and collateral consequences when they are caught and sanctioned for illegal behavior. These can include fines, incarceration or dismissal of responsible leaders, and a loss of managerial control over the firm (corporate probation). Collateral consequences may add reputational damage and negative market reactions, governmental restrictions on a firm's ability to compete for contracts, and employee and consumer dissatisfaction with the company in light of offending disclosures.

Although some criminologists contest prioritizing longitudinal methods over other (especially cross-sectional) designs (Cullen et al. 2019), as corporate crime scholars we observe the importance of longitudinal data in our field—especially large-scale panel or cohort projects that track the same sample of companies over a substantial period of time. Absent such data, comprehensive knowledge about corporate offenders, offense etiology, and patterns of corporate crime and regulation more broadly is compromised. Cross-sectional studies, an important source of information for corporate crime and legal sanctions, may report inconsistent findings or a new and unique outcome compared with the extant literature. Absent longitudinal studies, however, it is difficult to discern whether the results accurately describe a subsection of offenders included in the study, are a methodological artifact of which variables are measured and modeled, or are a consequence of when the study was conducted (true for a particular time period). “Such findings say more about the complexity of the phenomena of interest rather than anything else” (Hunter 2021, 32). Having access to large-scale longitudinal/

cohort corporate crime data can help to sort out some of these questions.

Regardless of the type of design,⁴ longitudinal data have many methodological strengths for the study of corporate crime. Because subjects are followed over time, observations are dynamic, not static. How and when companies change and the contexts in which change occurs can be tracked and linked in a proper temporal order—thus enhancing the ability to identify and isolate causal processes. When the data are of a panel nature (the same firms observed over time), researchers can drill down to observe stability and change in processes within firms over time (within-firm analysis) or compare groups of companies and their responses to events or circumstances in the aggregate (between-firm analysis) as a means of tracking developmental progressions, patterns, and trends over time. Thus, longitudinal data are ideal for theory testing and for measuring the consequences of shifting policies (such as deregulation) and the effects of crime prevention and control strategies on future behavior.

There are some downsides to longitudinal data. The data collection efforts are expensive (especially for large samples) and access to administrative data on corporate offending and firm characteristics is uneven. Most, if not all, longitudinal data in the corporate crime area rely on official violation measures which are biased and substantially undercount offending. In the United States, for instance, regulatory agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency or the Securities and Exchange Commission house their own data while federal criminal and civil data (Department of Justice) are difficult to retrieve and access. Firm-level data that report important independent variables of interest such as financials, company and market characteristics are not available for all companies and reporting periods vary (monthly, quarterly, yearly—calendar versus fiscal year). As Gibbs and Simpson (2009) show in their overview of regulatory enforcement data registers, there are pros and cons to using this type of data. Samples can shrink over time (Simpson 1986) as firms go out of business, merge with or are bought by other companies, or otherwise disappear from a sampling frame (such as dropping from the S&P 1000 or no longer operating in a particular industry or market). Additionally, socio-historical changes and modifications of terms and measures can affect series reliability over time. Although these limitations should be acknowledged, the use of longitudinal data offers advantages that appear to outweigh the associated drawbacks.

In the sections that follow, we describe the methods used to identify the data sources in our systematic narrative review; summarize what is contained in the data; and analyze the studies using a criminal career approach.

4 | Methods

4.1 | Data Collection

To identify relevant longitudinal studies for our review, we examined the corporate crime literature in two separate phases. The initial search was conducted by a co-author as part of another project and began in October 2017 and concluded in July

2018. The preliminary search used 22 search terms in eight databases, revealing 72 potentially eligible studies.⁵ The search included terms such as: corporate crime, longitudinal, corporate rule violations, corporate illegality, organizational crime, life course, regulatory violations, corporate illegal*, etc. To qualify for the study, articles had to examine civil, regulatory, and/or criminal violations; they needed to be written in English or Dutch; and the time period for the study required at least 5 years of data. After evaluating the articles for eligibility, only 12 studies fit the criteria.

The current research team conducted a second search in 2024 to gather articles published since 2017 and capture any research missed in the initial round. We shared our list of studies from the initial search with prominent scholars in the field to ask whether they had either conducted or knew of any additional studies beyond those listed. We also collected and assessed the fit of any studies mentioned within the eligible studies that were missing from our lists. For example, McKendall and Wagner (1997) listed 15 “major studies of corporate illegality” in their article (pp. 630–631). We located any studies we were missing from such lists. To determine eligibility in this round, all co-authors read the articles to verify that they met the inclusion criteria. In a few cases, it was difficult to determine eligibility based on the information provided in the articles, so we emailed the authors to clarify whether the data met our eligibility criteria. This process resulted in a final sample of 33 studies matching our eligibility criteria. Throughout the paper, the non-panel and panel studies are discussed separately to demonstrate the differences in the conclusions that can be drawn from the types of studies. While non-panel studies are useful for examining aggregate patterns, including factors related to the criminal career, only panel studies allow for assessments of within-company change.

4.2 | Sample Description

Of the 33 total studies, six used longitudinal datasets that collected violation data over time but did not track the same companies over the period (non-panel studies). The articles are listed and summarized in Table 1. Half of these studies were conducted in the United States; the others collected data in Australia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The earliest time period examined spanned 1961–1973 while the most recent time period covered 2000–2016. Across the six studies, the data trended to more recent decades (i.e., post 1980) and on average examined 10 years of data. Studies were primarily composed of large public companies from the Fortune 500, typically necessitated, in part, by the need for publicly available financial information. Nearly all the studies used the company as the unit of analysis to determine what factors influenced violations or decisions against the company. One study differed slightly in the unit of analysis, using 33 “corporate groups” composed of 33 companies and their 1908 subsidiaries (Bartlett et al. 2020). The non-panel samples ranged in size from those 33 corporate groups to 2952 companies.

All of the enforcement outcomes of interest for the non-panel studies relied on final verdict data. These are cases where guilt or responsibility was determined, that is, guilty pleas,

convictions, settlements, administrative law judge final orders, regulatory violations, and so on. In terms of offense type, the studies offer a range of general and specific offenses; two studies examined a variety of regulatory violations (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020), two analyzed antitrust offenses (Dalton and Kesner 1988; Perez 1978), and two focused on environmental wrongdoing (Hunter 2023; Johnson et al. 2020). Most studies included administrative, civil, and criminal enforcement actions, although one focused exclusively on criminal cases (Johnson et al. 2020). Within these non-panel datasets, a number of independent variables were examined, but the most common were firm financial performance, firm size, and industry sector.

The remaining 27 longitudinal studies employed a panel design that followed the same companies over time (see Table 1). Again, the majority of studies were conducted in the United States; only four were non-U.S. studies, three Dutch (Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025) and one that followed global companies representing 33 different countries (Orudzheva et al. 2020). The panel studies spanned an even wider period of time than the non-panel studies, with the earliest study being Sutherland's (1949/1983) seminal work covering the years 1890–1940 and the most recent examining a time period from 2007 to 2021 (Kluin et al. 2025). These studies also focused largely on the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s but were more likely to include earlier decades and were also more likely to cover multiple decades than the non-panel datasets. Four studies examined more than 40 years of data (Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1992, 1997; Sutherland 1949/1983). Like the non-panel studies, the panel studies primarily focused on large, public companies from either the Fortune 500 or the S&P 500. A noticeable percentage (52%), though, selected companies from a specific industry or sector, guided by multiple offending opportunities of different types within the industry (Block et al. 2006). The company year was the unit of analysis for all the panel studies with two exceptions: Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg (2025) conducted both a ship and business-level analysis and Johnson et al. (2020) examined both individual and company offenders. The samples of the panel studies ranged from 19 coal companies to 4621 firms.

In terms of data sources for the dependent variables in the panel studies, 16 cast a wide net examining criminal, civil, and regulatory offenses and enforcement actions (Block et al. 2006; Kedia et al. 2017; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Long et al. 2012; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Mishina et al. 2010; Simpson 1986; Simpson et al. 2007, 2020, 2025; Simpson and Koper 1992, 1997; Staw and Szwajkowski 1975; Sutherland 1949/1983); five restricted their data to criminal behavior (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Baucus and Near 1991; Harte 2011; Kesner et al. 1986); and three focused on regulatory offenses (Gibbs and Simpson 2009; Prechel and Zheng 2016; Simpson and Schell 2009). The remainder relied on alternatives to legal records. Of these, one study used firm financial restatements (Prechel and Morris 2010); another employed self-reported pollution releases known as Toxic Chemical Release Inventory (Stretesky et al. 2013).

TABLE 1 | Description of longitudinal studies in sample.

Study	Country	Sample	Years examined	Source of data	Type of violations	Panel data	Type of analysis	Longitudinal analysis?
Alalehto (2010)	Sweden	70 large companies	1999–2008	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for various offenses	No	Crosstab analysis of covariation	No
Asch and Seneca (1975)	United States	101 manufacturing companies	1958–1967	Criminal	Case conclusions for collusion	Yes	Chi-square tests	No
Asch and Seneca (1976)	United States	101 manufacturing companies	1958–1967	Criminal	Case conclusions for collusion	Yes	Regressions	Yes
Bartlett et al. (2020)	Australia	33 “corporate groups”—33 parent companies and 1908 subsidiaries	2010–2015	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for various offenses	No	Descriptive analysis	No
Baucus and Near (1991)	United States	182 Fortune 500 companies	1974–1983	Criminal	Case conclusions for antitrust, product liability, and other violations	Yes	Event history analysis ^a	Yes
Block et al. (2006)	United States	198 manufacturing firms in S&P 500	1990–1999	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Environmental, fraud, false claims, anticompetitive violations; case status could not be determined	Yes	Logistic regressions ^a	Unclear
Dalton and Kesner (1988)	United States	384 Fortune 500 firms	1980–1984	Court cases	Case conclusions for antitrust offenses	No	Contingency analysis	No
Gibbs and Simpson (2009)	United States	67 manufacturing firms	1995–2000	Regulatory	Case conclusions: rate of environmental violations	Yes	Correlations and descriptives ^a	No
Hunter (2023)	United Kingdom	2952 companies	2000–2016	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for environmental offenses	No	Logistic regressions	No
Harte (2011)	United States	100 Fortune 500 firms	1990–2007	Criminal	Case conclusions for various illegal behaviors	Yes	Historical analysis, logistic regressions ^b	Yes
Johnson et al. (2020)	United States	861 companies	1985–2010	Criminal	Case conclusions for environmental offenses	No	Graphs of percentage of cases and company characteristics	No

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Study	Country	Sample	Years examined	Source of data	Type of violations	Panel data	Type of analysis	Longitudinal analysis?
Kedia et al. (2017)	United States	4621 firms	1994–2011	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiation for product safety, antitrust and environmental offenses; case conclusions for labor violations	Yes	Pooled logistic regressions ^b	Yes
Kesner et al. (1986)	United States	384 Fortune 500 firms	1980–1984	Criminal	Case conclusions for antitrust offenses	Yes	Correlation, one-way analysis ^b	Yes
Kluin et al. (2018)	Netherlands	494 chemical companies	2006–2017	Criminal, civil & regulatory	Case initiations and conclusions for environmental, external safety, and occupational safety violations	Yes	Group-based trajectory modeling	Yes
Kluin et al. (2025)	Netherlands	567 chemical companies	2006–2021	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations and conclusions for environmental, external safety, and occupational safety violations	Yes	Group-based trajectory modeling	Yes
Long et al. (2012)	United States	19 coal companies	2000–2010	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for environmental violations	Yes	Fixed effects models ^a	Yes
McKendall and Wagner (1997)	United States	80 manufacturing companies	1983–1987	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for environmental offenses	Yes	Hierarchical Tobit regressions	No
Meester, Kluin, Blokland, and Huisman (2025)	Netherlands	4036 shipping companies	2015–2020	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for environmental offenses	Yes	Group-based trajectory modeling	Yes
Mishina et al. (2010)	United States	194 manufacturing firms from the S&P 500	1985–1988	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for environmental, fraud, false claims and anti-competitive violations	Yes	Logistic regressions ^b	Yes

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Study	Country	Sample	Years examined	Source of data	Type of violations	Panel data	Type of analysis	Longitudinal analysis?
Orudzheva et al. (2020)	International – 33 countries	469 large FT Global firms	2007–2015	Business conduct risks	Cases initiated: counts of corruption, bribery, extortion, and money laundering	Yes	Negative binomial generalized estimating equations	Yes
Prechel and Morris (2010)	United States	464 large publicly traded companies from Forbes 500	1994–2004	Self-report	Filed financial restatement	Yes	Generalized linear model with binomial distribution and logit link function ^b	Yes
Prechel and Zheng (2016)	United States	73 large publicly traded companies from FIRE sector	1995–2004	Regulatory	Case initiations: SEC filed allegation	Yes	Random-intercept logistic model ^b	Yes
S. Simpson (1986)	United States	52 manufacturing firms	1928–1981	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for antitrust violations	Yes	Ordinary least squares regression ^b	Yes
Simpson et al. (2007)	United States	67 (1995) pulp/paper, oil or steel companies, plus facilities	1995–2000	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations tracked to conclusions for environmental offenses	Yes	Descriptives, Pooled OLS regression	No
Simpson and Koper (1992)	United States	38 manufacturing firms	1928–1981	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for serious antitrust offenses	Yes	Discrete event history analysis ^b	Yes
Simpson and Koper (1997)	United States	43 manufacturing firms	1928–1981	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for antitrust violations	Yes	Pooled cross-sectional time series analysis ^b	No
Simpson and Schell (2009)	United States	55 pulp/paper, oil or steel companies	1990–2000	Regulatory	Case conclusions for OSHA violations	Yes	Fixed-effects time series analysis	Yes
Simpson et al. (2020)	United States	3327 companies	1996–2013	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for financial/corruption, environmental, and anti-competitive violations tracked to conclusions	Yes	Negative binomial fixed-effects model ^b	Yes

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Study	Country	Sample	Years examined	Source of data	Type of violations	Panel data	Type of analysis	Longitudinal analysis?
Simpson et al. (2025)	United States	3385 companies	1996–2013	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case initiations for financial/corruption, environmental, and anti-competitive violations tracked to conclusions	Yes	Trajectory Analysis ^a	Yes
Staw and Szwajkowski (1975)	United States	105 largest Fortune 500 firms	1968–1972	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Mix of cases initiated and conclusions: Unsettled cases, consent decrees or guilty of antitrust offenses	Yes	Z-tests	No
Stretesky et al. (2013)	United States	23 highly penalized companies	2003–2010	Self-report	Toxic releases	Yes	Fixed-effects models ^a	Yes
Sutherland (1949/1983)	United States	70 largest manufacturing, mining, and mercantile companies	1890–1940	Criminal, civil and regulatory	Case conclusions for various offenses	Yes	Descriptives	No

^aWithin company analysis.
^bWithin and between company analysis.

Lastly, one study used business conduct risks (Orudzheva et al. 2020). The majority of the studies (11) analyzed final verdict or case conclusions; nine used initiated cases (Kedia et al. 2017; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Prechel and Zheng 2016; Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1992, 1997; Simpson et al. 2020, 2025), four included a mix of initiated and concluded cases (Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Simpson et al. 2007; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975), two used self-report data rather than enforcement data (Prechel and Morris 2010; Stretesky et al. 2013), and one could not be determined (Block et al. 2006). The offense types investigated varied greatly across panel studies; 10 examined an assortment of offenses (Baucus and Near 1991; Block et al. 2006; Harte 2011; Kedia et al. 2017; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Mishina et al. 2010; Simpson et al. 2020, 2025; Sutherland 1949/1983); seven focused on antitrust/anti-competition violations (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Kesner et al. 1986; Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1992, 1997; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975); six analyzed environmental violations (Gibbs and Simpson 2009; Long et al. 2012; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2007; Stretesky et al. 2013), two examined financial offenses (Prechel and Morris 2010; Prechel and Zheng 2016), one covered corruption, money laundering, bribery, and extortion (Orudzheva et al. 2020), and one focused on occupational safety violations (Simpson and Schell 2009). There was a greater variety of independent variables in the panel studies, but the most common were similar to non-panel studies, with firm financial performance and firm size being the most frequently used. Industry factors played a larger role in these analyses, with market sector, concentration, and profitability appearing often. There were also investigations into the impact of prior offending, enforcement actions, and various corporate governance measures, including but not restricted to, commitment to corporate social responsibility (Harte 2011), independence of CEO and board members (Kesner et al. 1986; Simpson and Koper 1997; Simpson et al. 2020), ethical climate (McKendall and Wagner 1997), background of CEO and promotional path (Simpson and Koper 1997); and gender diversity and background of the board (Simpson et al. 2020).

In general, the analyses in both non-panel and panel papers were tailored to the specific interests of the researchers and their data, and the majority of this work focused on corporate crime etiology. However, simpler analytic techniques were more common among the non-panel studies; the majority (4/6) used descriptive analysis (Bartlett et al. 2020), cross-tabs (Alalehto 2010; Dalton and Kesner 1988), and graphs representing percentages of cases (Johnson et al. 2020). The remaining two studies (Hunter 2023; Perez 1978) conducted analyses using various regressions, and in one instance also used factor analysis and path modeling (Perez 1978). Analyses in panel studies were generally more statistically complex; only a minority of studies (18.5%) used simple analytic techniques, such as descriptive analysis/case studies (Sutherland 1949/1983), correlations (Gibbs and Simpson 2009; Kesner et al. 1986), chi-square tests (Asch and Seneca 1975), and z-tests (Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975). The remaining studies used regressions and advanced methods for addressing change over time, including event-history analysis (Baucus and

Near 1991; Simpson and Koper 1992; Simpson et al. 2007), historical/archival analysis (Harte 2011), time series analysis (Simpson and Schell 2009), group-based trajectory analysis (Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025), and case-crossover (Long et al. 2012).

Non-panel studies were less likely to test theoretical perspectives; only two of the six studies engaged in theory-testing. Those studies examined support for deterrence and differential social organization. On the other hand, 18 of the 27 panel studies (74%) examined a wide variety of theoretical frameworks, including newer theories such as life-course and organizational life-cycle theories (Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025). In part, this was related to the fact that nearly 56% of panel studies (15) examined within-company differences, which is helpful for causal inference as each firm serves as its own control.

In the next section, we conduct a systematic narrative review to determine themes and patterns in methodology and findings across studies. Specifically, we examine the findings of previous research to establish what they reveal about predictors of corporate offending and corporate criminal careers. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the literature and recommendations for future longitudinal research investigating corporate criminal careers.

5 | Results

There are several common findings among these studies, many of which can be examined through a criminal career lens. Specifically, we fit reported results into each criminal career dimension (participation, frequency, crime mix, and duration). In doing so, we also make note of areas that require further investigation.

Before examining these results, however, we reiterate the logic behind how findings from these studies tap into criminal career dimensions. *Participation* is related to whether a corporation engages in offending or not (either in general or at specific time points), regardless of the extent of this offending. Studies that measured offending or illegal behavior outcomes through binary indicators were thus considered to be assessing variables related to participation. *Frequency* considers the level of offending or illegal behavior by a corporation, including counts and rates of offending by particular businesses or groups of firms. Studies that measured offending or illegal behavior outcomes through the number of offenses/violations were therefore considered to be examining factors related to frequency. *Crime mix* examines variation in the kinds of illegal behavior engaged in by a firm (including seriousness and escalation), as well as the extent to which such behavior is specialized or generalized. Finally, *duration* addresses the length of a criminal career. Each section will categorize findings from the studies under review as they relate to these dimensions in their application to corporate offending, although some findings may fall into multiple dimensions. Findings that are more pertinent to the criminal career paradigm, such as those relating to variables commonly discussed at the individual level, are examined first in each section before

discussing more general findings related to corporate offending as they can be understood through this lens. Table 2 presents an overview of the key findings on criminal career dimensions.

5.1 | Participation

Regarding participation in offending, studies revealed corporate offending to be a relatively common occurrence rather than a rare event (Alalehto 2010; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Sutherland 1949/1983). However, some studies found that most firms do not have formal actions brought against them (Kluin et al. 2025; Simpson et al. 2025). The observed discrepancy across studies may be due to variations in the data examined (e.g., the sample of firms and offense types included in the study), biases associated with official data (i.e., the hidden figure of crime), as well as the kind of legal responses examined (regulatory, civil, versus criminal violations).

A few studies also report findings regarding the “age” of a company. While age is difficult to define in the corporate context (Blokland et al. 2021), whether a corporation was formed relatively recently or has existed for a substantial period of time can be assessed and considered in our analyses. For instance, Hunter (2023) found that firms that were newer at the time of their first offense were more likely to engage in environmental reoffending. This pattern is suggestive that firms, like individuals who onset during early life phases, are more likely to continue offending (recidivate) throughout their life-cycle. Outside of recidivism, Kedia et al. (2017) conducted *t*-tests and found that older firms tended to have more offending firm-years. This relationship is in contrast with the individual-level literature that indicates younger people offend more often but makes sense given that older firms have longer opportunities to offend. However, the positive relationship between age and offending risk reversed when Kedia et al. (2017) conducted regression analyses that controlled for other variables, suggesting that younger firms are actually at a higher risk for offending when accounting for confounding factors. These complicated results demonstrate the uncertain relationship between company age and offending and suggest the possibility that different stages of the organizational life-cycle related to age may create unique conditions and pressures that increase the risk of certain types of corporate offending while lessening others (e.g., younger firms may be more apt to violate environmental requirements while older firms “cook” the books).⁶ Organizations that are newly formed tend to have fewer personnel and/or a less structured bureaucracy with evolving rules and procedures to guide employees regarding legal versus illegal business requirements—values and norms are still crystalizing. Older firms are more apt to have these structures in place but survival threats from new sources of competition, lack of innovation, and bureaucratic ossification create pressures for solutions that may result in illegal means to solve problems. It is important to note, however, that Prechel and Morris (2010) and Prechel and Zheng (2016) found that age was unrelated to a firm’s likelihood of financial malfeasance after controlling for organizational complexity, which increased with age. Some versions of organizational life-cycle theory emphasize how firm growth and expansion require new internal complex structures with their own hierarchies; thus,

age is associated with firm complexity. These results suggest that further investigations into the age of a corporation will need to take into account firm complexity and offense type.

Many studies additionally report findings that are consistently known and understood in the corporate criminological literature, although they were not examined through the criminal career lens. However, since the majority of these results appear for both participation and frequency of offending, we report those only pertaining to participation here and discuss the overlapping findings in the frequency section alone.

The most commonly reported finding is that larger companies, compared with smaller firms, are more likely to engage in offending or illegal behavior (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Baucus and Near 1991; Dalton and Kesner 1988; Harte 2011; Hunter 2023; Kedia et al. 2017; Mishina et al. 2010; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Prechel and Morris 2010; Prechel and Zheng 2016; Simpson and Koper 1997), although the effect of size is inconsistent across the studies. Some show no relationship between company size and environmental violations (Long et al. 2012) while others report more complex patterns that vary by type of decision (Alalehto 2010) or measurement, that is, count of violations versus violation rates (Gibbs and Simpson 2009). Thus, observed differences relating to size may be a consequence of construct measurement and whether one examines cases brought against a company, cases concluded (convictions), or firm reporting of violations. Offense type also may differentially be related to company size. Many organizational life-cycle theories highlight firm size (and complexity) as central characteristics that distinguish one life-cycle stage from another; however, some models emphasize developmental links to company size while others emphasize age (Mosca et al. 2021). Both variables may be useful for predicting the likelihood of offending participation once measurement nuances are worked out.

Beyond firm size, factors concerning other characteristics of firms appear to be related to participation in illegal behavior as well. For example, Bartlett et al. (2020) found offending largely was concentrated in wholly owned subsidiary corporations rather than in parent corporations. Similarly, owning a greater number of facilities is associated with increased offending when compared to firms owning fewer or no facilities (Simpson et al. 2007; Prechel and Zheng 2016). These results may be related to: (a) differential offending opportunities between firms—those with subsidiaries or facilities have more opportunities to violate the law; (b) structural and cultural similarities between parent firms and the owned entities that encourage offending; (c) a breakdown in management control between parent companies and their subsidiaries/facilities; and/or (d) subsidiaries and facilities may be subject to different laws and regulations than their parent company depending on where they operate. Additionally, attributes of firms and the broader environment such as performance anxiety or pressures to meet certain expectations of shareholders (Block et al. 2006; Mishina et al. 2010) are associated with participation in illegal behavior. Changes in organizational design and structure may signify movement from one life-cycle stage to another while possibly triggering new offending patterns. Similarly, responsiveness to external pressures and crises activate the process of organizational development (Adizes 1979; Galbraith 1982; Lippitt and Schmidt 1967)

TABLE 2 | Key criminal career findings from longitudinal studies.

Dimension	Novel findings from the narrative review	Common findings from the narrative review
Participation	- Offending among companies is relatively common (Alalehto 2010; Kluin et al. 2018; Kluin et al. 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Sutherland 1949/1983) - Firms that are newer at time of first offense are more likely to reoffend (Hunter 2023) - Mixed results: <i>t</i>-tests showed older firms had more non-compliant firm years, but regression analyses revealed that younger firms exhibit higher financial reporting risk (Kedia et al. 2017) - Age unrelated to firm's offending once control for organizational complexity (Prechel and Morris 2010; Prechel and Zheng 2016)	- Larger companies offend more than smaller companies (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Baucus and Near 1991; Dalton and Kesner 1988; Harte 2011; Hunter 2023; Kedia et al. 2017; Mishina et al. 2010; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Prechel and Morris 2010; Prechel and Zheng 2016; Simpson and Koper 1997) - Subsidiaries more likely to offend than parent companies (Bartlett et al. 2020) - Companies with more subsidiaries were more likely to offend (Prechel and Zheng 2016)^a - Performance anxiety/shareholder pressure is associated with participation in illegal behavior (Block et al. 2006; Mishina et al. 2010)
Frequency	- Small number of companies commit disproportionate number of offenses (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020; Hunter 2023; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025) - Repeat offending is common (Kedia et al. 2017; Sutherland 1949/1983) - Prior offending predicts future offending (Kedia et al. 2017; Simpson and Koper 1997; Stretesky et al. 2013) - Violations predict future offending in cross-sectional analysis but are associated with fewer offenses in longitudinal analysis (Simpson and Schell 2009) - Companies with more facilities have higher offense counts but lower rates of offending (Simpson et al. 2007)^a - Frequency of violations is not evenly distributed across businesses (Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025) - Offending is shaped by historical period (Johnson et al. 2020; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Mishina et al. 2010; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Simpson et al. 2007) - Board gender diversity is positively related to corporate offending when just one token female on the board (Simpson et al. 2020)^a	- Laws or enforcement actions lower the risk of reoffending (Harte 2011; Simpson and Koper 1992; Simpson et al. 2020) - Financial performance and economic factors linked to increased offending (Alalehto 2010; Asch and Seneca 1975; Asch and Seneca 1976; Block et al. 2006; Harte 2011; Kedia et al. 2017; Mishina et al. 2010; Perez 1978; Simpson 1986; Staw and Szwajkowski 1975) - Industry norms and profitability are associated with illegality (Kedia et al. 2017; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Simpson 1986; Simpson et al. 2007) - Some industries are more criminogenic than others (Alalehto 2010; Asch and Seneca 1975; Asch and Seneca 1976; Bartlett et al. 2020; Baucus and Near 1991; Hunter 2023; Kedia et al. 2017; Kluin et al. 2025; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1992; Staw and Szwajkowski 1975) - Environmental and internal conditions of the firm increase illegality (Baucus and Near 1991; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Prechel and Morris 2010) - Board size increases offending (Block et al. 2006; Mishina et al. 2010) - Higher CEO compensation increases financial reporting risk (Kedia et al. 2017). - Outsiders on corporate boards are unrelated to firm offending (Kesner et al. 1986) - CEO succession lowers the risk of future offending while certain CEO backgrounds increase offending (Simpson and Koper 1997)^a
Crime mix	- Support for generalization in offending (Baucus and Near 1991) - Various predictors led to offending across offense types, with a few exceptions related to antitrust offending (Baucus and Near 1991) - Profit-squeeze variables generally produced similar impact on trivial and serious antitrust violations, though value-added by manufacturer increased trivial violations and decreased serious antitrust violations (Simpson 1986) - Predictors of serious and non-serious environmental violations vary (McKendall and Wagner 1997) - Severity of offending depends on historical point in time (Harte 2011; Orudzheva et al. 2020) - Minority of offenses appear to be serious violations (Simpson and Schell 2009)	
Duration	Distinct trajectories with various patterns of offending over time exist for corporations (Kluin et al. 2018; Kluin et al. 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025)	

^aThese results have implications for participation and frequency, but we only post them in the table under participation. We discuss the results in both participation and frequency in the text.

but contextually create intra-organizational strains that can increase the risk of corporate offending.

5.2 | Frequency

Concerning frequency, similar to major findings about individual criminal careers, several studies, both panel and non-panel, reveal that a relatively small number of companies are responsible for most or a substantial portion of all reported offenses (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020; Hunter 2023; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025). For example, Kluin et al. (2025) found that among 567 Dutch Seveso corporations examined from 2007 to 2021, 72.36% of detected violations were committed by 37.57% of the corporations, and 33.60% of violations were committed by only 11.11% of corporations that were identified as committing 40+ violations during the period. Bartlett et al. (2020) examined corporate groups (firms plus subsidiaries) and found similar patterns. Specifically, 33.3% of offending corporate groups were responsible for 76.4% of offenses—most of which were committed by corporate subsidiaries. Hunter (2023) noted that a small proportion of the corporations were responsible for the majority of the violations; 528 companies committed half of the violations (2442 of 4866 violations).

Second, repeat offenders are relatively common (Kedia et al. 2017; Sutherland 1949/1983). Corporations tend to engage in multiple instances of offending rather than a single act, similar to that of individual offending. Further, prior violations are predictive of future offending (Kedia et al. 2017; Simpson and Koper 1997; Stretesky et al. 2013) and including prior offending in one's statistical model improves the fit of the data (Baucus and Near 1991). However, Simpson and Schell (2009) noted that while prior OSHA violations were predictive of future violations when data were analyzed cross-sectionally, companies in their sample had *fewer* offenses in subsequent years when examined longitudinally. A similar pattern was observed in the original data Simpson and Schell (2009) used for their study but which focused on environmental violations instead of OSHA offenses (Simpson et al. 2007). In addition, firms with more facilities had higher offending counts over time. However, when offending was calculated as a rate instead of a count, the pattern reversed such that firms with more facilities had a lower offending rate than firms that owned fewer facilities. Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg (2025) found that the frequency of registered violations in the Dutch inland shipping industry was not evenly distributed across businesses. Thus, more frequent offenders may cluster in certain businesses. These findings highlight the importance of longitudinal research for understanding the criminal careers of corporations, as well as potential variations in corporate structure, offense type and measurement.

Third, historical time and place (Elder 1994) and cohort differences (Neil and Sampson 2021) may be linked to corporate offending frequency (as well as whether firms participate in offending at all). Several studies found that the point in history or the year to be associated with offending patterns, possibly due to changes in governmental regulations, enforcement practices, as well as the political and economic environment of a

given firm (Johnson et al. 2020; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Mishina et al. 2010; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Simpson et al. 2007). Johnson et al. (2020) study of environmental prosecutions in the United States from 1985 to 2010 reveals that both the extent to which companies were prosecuted for environmental offenses and the kind of offenses, organizations, and actors held liable (individuals or organizations) changed during their examination period. In a similar manner, when companies are created and the economic environment that exists during distinct stages of their lifecycle may result in varying offending patterns—circling back to the idea of cohort differences as seen for offending patterns among people (although this was not explicitly examined by any of the studies assessed in this review). Different points in history will provide more or less opportunity for corporate offending and whether a company engages in illegal behavior may be partially dependent upon this broader socio-historical context—including reactions to offending (crime control responses such as deregulation or deterrence strategies that focus prosecution efforts on responsible individuals instead of the company). Thus, the manner in which corporate characteristics relate to criminal career dimensions also appears to depend upon historical time and place. Similarly, the socio-historical context may explain variation in life-cycle patterns (e.g., linear/nonlinear, Habib and Hasan 2019) over time.

More general findings that are discussed in the broader corporate crime literature were also noted to be important for frequency of offending. First, there is limited evidence favoring deterrence. Conceptually, deterrence ties the threat of or application of punishment to lowering offending among actively offending firms or to desistance. A selection of the studies (Harte 2011; Simpson and Koper 1992; Simpson et al. 2020) show that certain policies (e.g., changes in law) or types of legal sanctions (criminal compared with regulatory and civil) reduce the risk of reoffending. In contrast, others found that sanctions had little impact on the likelihood of environmental reoffending (Hunter 2023; Simpson et al. 2007). These mixed results suggest that deterrent effects may depend upon the kind of offending examined, the agency doing the enforcing, and/or the type and degree of punishment applied (Bartlett et al. 2020). However, given that some studies rely on non-panel data (Bartlett et al. 2020; Hunter 2023) and examine companies and legal regimes from outside the United States (England and Australia), it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions.

Second, from a criminal career perspective, there may be important differences among the firms identified as frequent offenders which could better inform intervention strategies. For instance, characteristics like financial performance (Alalehto 2010; Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Simpson et al. 2007; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975) and economic factors (Perez 1978) are also linked to increased illegal behavior by firms, although the performance indicator selected likely matters for results (Simpson et al. 2007). Firms with low profitability or poor performance, including the prospect of poor future financial performance, have an increased risk of offending (Block et al. 2006; Mishina et al. 2010). Also notable is an apparent positive association between some forms of illegality and company growth/profitability (Harte 2011; Kedia et al. 2017; Simpson 1986). Furthermore, characteristics of specific industries such as industry norms (Kedia et al. 2017) and profitability (McKendall

and Wagner 1997; Simpson 1986; Simpson et al. 2007) are associated with more or less frequent firm illegality depending upon the measure.

Third, across both panel and non-panel studies, several company characteristics are important for understanding the frequency of offending as well as participation. Studies suggest that companies in certain industries are not only more likely to participate in offending (Alalehto 2010; Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Bartlett et al. 2020; Baucus and Near 1991; Hunter 2023; Kedia et al. 2017; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1992; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975), both relative to other firms (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020; Baucus and Near 1991; Hunter 2023) and compared to other industries in the study (Simpson 1986; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975), but also engage in more frequent offending or illegal behavior relative to other offending firms (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020; Baucus and Near 1991; Hunter 2023; Simpson et al. 2007). This indicates that certain industries are more likely to have offending firms generally (participation), and some may foster greater offending behavior compared to other industries (frequency). However, studies diverge regarding which industries are most criminogenic. Industry sectors, like manufacturing (Alalehto 2010), finance (Bartlett et al. 2020), and others, were noted as offending more often, but this depended upon the data examined and whether these broad industrial categories are broken into specific business types (e.g., auto manufacturing, steel manufacturing, pulp & paper). More work is needed to drill down on whether offending, participation, and frequency are related to industry characteristics (e.g., some industries are more regulated than others), differences among firms in specific industries, or an interaction between firm and industry characteristics (Wang and Holtfreter 2011).

Other aspects such as environmental and internal factors (Baucus and Near 1991; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Prechel and Morris 2010) and corporate governance structures (Alalehto 2010; Block et al. 2006; Harte 2011; Long et al. 2012; Mishina et al. 2010; Prechel and Zheng 2016; Simpson and Koper 1997; Simpson et al. 2020) also appear to be related to both participation in and frequency of illegal behavior by firms. Regarding corporate governance structures, studies found that factors like board size (Block et al. 2006; Mishina et al. 2010), corporate restructuring (Long et al. 2012), and executive compensation (salary and bonuses) (Prechel and Zheng 2016) were positively related to participation in different kinds of corporate offending. Importantly, these characteristics and features of firms also tie into different phases of the organizational life-cycle. For instance, developmental shifts affect the emergence of new management structures (Adizes 1979) which may be activated by environmental (external) pressures and opportunities (Galbraith 1982). Other relationships between corporate governance structures and offending in these studies were less straightforward, such as the role of board gender diversity (Simpson et al. 2020) and CEO/Board chair separation (Block et al. 2006), indicating a need for more replication to collaborate results. For frequency, Harte (2011) found that the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX), through its influence as a corporate governance mechanism, decreased illegal corporate behavior. Further related to corporate governance structures, Simpson and Koper (1997) found that changes

in top management (CEO turnover) were related to decreases in offending, while CEO background characteristics (being previously in finance and administration) were associated with increased offending. Governance characteristics—such as having outsiders on corporate boards, were unrelated to decreases in firm illegality (Kesner et al. 1986). These variables and characteristics can be examined further within a criminal career paradigm to identify risk and protective factors across the corporate life-cycle. Specifically, a strand of corporate governance research investigates life-cycle effects on “board structure, executive compensation, CSR [corporate social responsibility] activities and other corporate governance issues” (Habib and Hasan 2019, 197). All of these governance mechanisms (which vary across life-cycle stages) can be linked directly to corporate offending patterns. These linkages offer important avenues for future research.

5.3 | Crime Mix

Relatively little research that we reviewed deals directly with the nuances of crime type, that is what kinds of offenses are committed, how serious they are, and whether there is evidence of specialization or generalization. As discussed in the data and methods section, most of the studies focus on specific kinds of offending like environmental offenses, antitrust, or corruption. Of the studies that did examine a variety of offenses, only one analyzed offending by type (Baucus and Near 1991); other studies examined all offending types together to create a general measure of offending. Further, while three studies (Perez 1978; Simpson et al. 2007, 2025) analyzed differences within specific offense categories, these kinds of examinations do not allow us to assess how offending varies by different kinds of crime or violations. Because of this, it is difficult to determine whether there are variations across company characteristics and offending patterns, trends, and trajectories dependent upon the type of offense or violation as we see with individual offending. The one study that did analyze predictors across offense types found that various predictors led to offending across the board, with a few exceptions related to antitrust offending (Baucus and Near 1991). Thus, some evidence exists for generalization in offending.

In terms of offending seriousness, Simpson (1986) separates antitrust/anticompetitive violations by those considered trivial or serious, finding similarities in the effects of various profit-squeeze variables. However, industry level profitability “[v]alue-added by manufacturer) is *positive* in its relationship with trivial violations but *negative* and significant when predicting serious antitrust criminality” (Simpson 1986, 868). McKendall and Wagner (1997) separated corporate offending into serious and non-serious environmental violations per 1000 employees, yielding varying levels of support for proposed relationships. Relative to historical time and place, Harte (2011) found that larger firms engaged in more serious offending in the pre-SOX (Sarbanes-Oxley Act) era than after. Similarly, Orudzheva et al. (2020) examined the severity of corruption, finding that the number of high severity issues increased after 2009–2013. Simpson and Schell (2009) also found, descriptively, in their sample of companies that most OSHA violations were classified as either “serious” or “other” while only 12% of violations could be placed in the three other categories (willful, repeat,

and unclassified). Collectively, these results may indicate a lack of variety in seriousness within studies that focus on one kind of offending and/or that findings are variable and context dependent. They also may suggest that, similar to previous discussions, elements of the regulatory environment which change over time may influence the seriousness of corporate offending or the types of violations generally. Given this, more research is needed to explore these elements of crime mix.

5.4 | Duration

The last dimension, duration, is much more difficult to identify in corporate offending data as it requires a longitudinal, within-company assessment of how companies change in their offending participation and frequency over a substantial period of time. Further, the exact beginning and end of a corporation's criminal career depends on measuring offending over the corporate life-cycle, from the "birth" of a company to its "death." And, as we discuss later, the corporate life-cycle is not necessarily linear, nor do all firms follow the same paths. Therefore, it will be important empirically to describe how duration may vary by these different life-cycle pathways.

A few panel studies utilizing group-based trajectory modeling offer some insights into this career dimension, finding identifiable groups of corporations that have varying patterns of offending over time (Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025). In their study of inland shipping in the Netherlands, Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg (2025) show that firms can be broken down into groups by the frequency of observed violations over time. Most companies were consistently low in their recorded violations while a small minority were consistently high (as is the case with individual offenders), and others were either rising or declining in their violations. When offending was analyzed at the ship level, there was no constantly high group, but a constant low, increasing, decreasing, and strongly decreasing group emerged. However, because this study only examined a 5 year period (2015–2020), conclusions about the true "duration" of offending are difficult to ascertain. In another study from the Netherlands, Kluin et al. (2025) examined violations ($N=11,079$) among Dutch Seveso corporations ($N=567$) over a much longer period (2007–2021) using group based trajectory modeling. They distinguish seven trajectory groups, with three groups showing less than 2 violations per year during the 15-year follow-up period. The other groups show an increasing or decreasing trajectory pathway of offending with a yearly average of violating rules ranging from 9.5 to 3 and 1 to 5.5. Regulatory enforcement pressure was taken into account after accounting for the number of inspections. Finally, Simpson et al. (2025) used trajectory analysis to examine incidents of alleged accounting fraud, bribery, anti-competitive behavior, and environmental offending by US-based S&P 1500 companies between 1996 and 2013 ($N=3385$ firms). This study showed a wide distribution of offending across firms (range = 1–138 incidents), but most companies did not offend at all during the time period (even though the study measured offending broadly—using a combination of civil, criminal, and regulatory enforcement actions). The analysis fitted three trajectory groups of which the most common pattern (nearly 85%)

was the never or almost never offending group. The second most common trajectory group, but capturing far fewer companies, was the intermittent/occasional offender (12.5%). These firms reveal a pattern of offending over time, but at a low level per year. The third trajectory group, represented by a small (2.9%) high frequency offender, showed a decreasing pattern of offending over time. Collectively, these studies show some evidence of significant change in violations over time along with patterns of stability, but more research is needed, particularly longitudinal research spanning multiple decades.

5.5 | Summary

Although our systematic narrative is far from conclusive regarding the dimensions of the corporate criminal career, there are some key take-aways from this study. We observe several patterns that are consistent with individual criminal career research. Companies, like individuals, vary in their degree and character of offending. Most are rare or occasional offenders, but some offend often and chronically. We see some (limited) evidence that firms are generalists and not specialists; some are deterred by contact with legal authorities, but like cohort studies of individuals, we also observe period effects where, to paraphrase Sampson and Smith (2021, 13, emphasis added) *when* companies are thus matters as much as, and perhaps more than, *who* companies are. The age effect has proven more difficult to unravel because firm age, compared with individuals, is harder to conceptualize and measure. Few of the studies reviewed in our sample examined company age. Among those that did, some observed patterns track findings for individuals: Offending is primarily the province of youth (i.e., newly formed companies). However, the age effect is also nuanced. Firms that offend early appear to offend more often over time. Descriptive analyses indicate that older, more mature, and stable companies commit more offenses; however, when more sophisticated statistical techniques are applied and control variables are included, younger firms seem to have a higher risk of financial offending. Because the age effect is tied to different offense types (environmental in the former instance and financial in the latter) and possibly different legal responses (regulatory vs. civil/criminal), it is not possible at this point to discern whether this result will withstand more deliberate scrutiny.

Our analysis and findings point to how corporations differ in the contours of their criminal careers, contributing to our understanding of corporate offending. This knowledge may be utilized to prevent and address the corporate crime problem. For instance, understanding characteristics related to participation and frequency can help regulators and judges assess a firm's relative risk of future offending as well as whether they are more likely to engage in more extensive and/or serious offending behavior. Furthermore, the criminal career perspective and the findings derived from longitudinal studies like the ones examined in this narrative review indicate the importance of acknowledging factors such as company "age," size, and complexity; the country where an organization primarily operates; and the broader regulatory environment when tailoring enforcement and prevention tactics. It is evident that the aforementioned factors likely influence offending among corporations and how such offending is to be most efficiently handled. However, how they matter and to

what extent requires further research. Such efforts can provide information for developing strategies that are adaptable over time and cognizant of how corporate offending may be sensitive to both time and context-dependent influences. In addition, the potential existence of a smaller group of high-offending firms (Kluin et al. 2018) opens up the possibility for using more selective intervention mechanisms that do not necessarily harbor the kinds of ethical issues selective legal interventions have for individuals. Understanding differences in offending trajectories for corporations (Kluin et al. 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025) and increasing the capacity for regulators and governments to identify the most problematic among them, particularly those that may require intervention to disrupt upward offending trajectories, can serve to bolster the regulatory environment and provide new avenues for disrupting and preventing corporate offending. Finally, our results point to a critical need to better document and merge official information about corporate offending into a systematic database that integrates criminal, civil, and regulatory data (Simpson and Yeager 2015).

Lastly, although not the focus of this paper per se, findings regarding internal governance mechanisms (e.g., characteristics of director boards and top management teams) are useful for internal crime prevention efforts. These foci are relatively rare in criminology (and in our longitudinal sample of studies), but the effectiveness and components of internal compliance programs; changes in top management and who takes over, and whether corporate boards characterized by a disproportionate number of insiders, a lack of diversity and little turnover are associated with a greater risk of misconduct is of great interest to corporate stakeholders.

6 | Implications and Directions for Future Research

Using a criminal career framework to investigate longitudinal studies of corporate crime offending is a useful tool to identify the contours of offending dimensions and patterns of stability and change. Importantly, the empirical patterning of the corporate criminal career has significant theoretical implications for a corporate alternative to the traditional criminal career paradigm which focuses on individual offenders. Some research, albeit contested, suggests that corporations follow predictable patterns over time, characterized by different phases of development (Miller and Friesen 1984; Quinn and Cameron 1983; Habib and Hasan 2019). Similar to individuals, corporations change over time, which can be seen as a 'corporate life-cycle' (Boulding 1952; Chandler 1962; Greiner 1972; Levie and Lichtenstein 2010; Phelps et al. 2007; Quinn and Cameron 1983).

Studies in our systematic narrative review showed that certain aspects of the criminal career paradigm, such as pathways into offending, can be discerned (Kluin et al. 2018; Kluin et al. 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Simpson et al. 2025) and thus provide insights into the criminal career of corporations. As Kluin et al. (2018), Kluin et al. (2025), and Simpson (2019) argue, corporate crime scholars can use this approach to analyze how corporate offending develops and changes over the course of

an organizational or corporate life-cycle. Al-Taie and Cater-Steel (2020) suggest, in their extensive review, that Lester et al.'s (2003) five-stage life cycle model is the most empirically valid for a range of industries and the most dependable for a broad range of corporations. The model offers a general theory of growth of the firm, consisting of five stages: existence, survival, success, renewal and decline. For a detailed description of this model we refer to Wu et al. (2024). If we draw a parallel with individual developmental life stages, they are as follows: birth, growth, maturity, decline and death (Blokland et al. 2021, 695; Simpson 2019, 197). According to conventional organizational life-cycle theory, corporations progress through these stages. Due to a lack of data and information it was not possible to actually apply Lester's (2003) life-cycle stages, but we did observe characteristics and patterns of offending that could be contextualized within different stages.

The conventional life-cycle model has been extended to incorporate firm transitions that are nonlinear, showing that some firms move back and forth from one stage to another in their life-cycle (Dickinson 2011; Habib and Hasan 2019). Regardless of which model is employed, however, longitudinal data with a multi-level approach is pivotal to fully exploring the different stages. This systematic narrative review showed that it is possible to investigate dimensions of a criminal career in longitudinal studies on corporate crime offending with such a different perspective. Life-cycle theories do not theorize directly about corporate misconduct per se but they hint at risk and protective factors at different developmental stages that correspond to stability and change in offending patterns.

In sum, this approach offers a promising direction for further investigation of the corporate criminal career and the organizational life-cycle. Developing longitudinal data with this kind of theory testing in mind, coupled with attention to the different dimensions of the criminal career, can build comprehensive knowledge about corporate offenders, offense etiology, and patterns of corporate crime and regulation more broadly. Although much more research is required to explore these linkages, the organizational life-cycle paradigm presents concepts, multi-level factors, and key markers of stability and change that can inform the corporate criminal career paradigm and vice-versa.

7 | Limitations and Recommendations

Although our narrative review shows the potential of longitudinal data to unpack corporate criminal career dimensions, we would be remiss not to mention the limitations of these studies. First, while all utilized longitudinal data, a substantial portion used cross-sectional or descriptive analytic methods—failing to tap into the strengths that longitudinal data provide (Alalehto 2010; Bartlett et al. 2020; Dalton and Kesner 1988; Hunter 2023; Johnson et al. 2020; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Perez 1978; Staw and Sz wajkowski 1975; Sutherland 1949/1983). Second, our narrative review was hampered by limited descriptions of study data and analytic methods. In some instances, it was difficult to discern at what point in the legal processes offense data were drawn, that is, case initiations or final case determinations. Similarly, some authors were unclear about

their data sources—that is, were incidents inclusive of all legal remedies (civil, criminal, regulatory) or just one or two? Because of this, we may have (1) missed eligible longitudinal studies to include in our review or (2) determined a study was panel or non-panel erroneously. Third, related to methodological issues (as mentioned in the section on frequency), this literature often lacks information about change over time within corporations relative to their historical periods, which is important for studying the criminal careers of these entities. As previously mentioned, Simpson and Schell (2009) note that the inhibition effect of OSHA enforcement was time period dependent. Similarly, Harte's (2011) findings regarding changes in corporate offending post-SOX are supportive of the influence of law and the regulatory environment which changes over time. Broad societal level events (such as the environmental movement) can shift the socio-historical context in which firms operate, affecting both culture and social institutions (government and law). Thus, the impact of the regulatory environment is not necessarily independent from history. Johnson et al. (2020), Kluin et al. (2018), and Kluin et al. (2025) analyses, in particular, demonstrate how dynamic the corporate offending and enforcement environment can be over time. These important factors should be identified and examined dynamically with longitudinal data, comparison of multiple cohorts, or (at a minimum) data expanding across a significant number of years (Kluin et al. 2025). Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal designs that examine how corporate offending evolves over time within individual corporations. A key research question is how the criminal careers of corporations change over time within individual corporations, and how these changes are shaped by broader historical, regulatory or economic periods. Importantly, our review is dominated by studies from Western “Global North” countries possibly masking the extent to which our observations may reflect patterns that are affected by these specific institutional and regulatory environments. Therefore, we strongly encourage longitudinal studies from regions beyond these constraints to assess whether the results reported here are globally representative.

Relatedly, several of the reviewed studies examine relatively short periods of time, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about corporate criminal careers and the potential impact of socio-historical factors over time (Bartlett et al. 2020; Dalton and Kesner 1988; Gibbs and Simpson 2009; Kesner et al. 1986; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Mishina et al. 2010; Simpson et al. 2007; Staw and Szajkowski 1975). So too, left censoring of data will impact criminal career data patterns, unless the data are inclusive of firm inception—which is atypical across these studies. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that span longer historical periods and where possible, include data from firm inception. A key research question is how does left censoring, particularly the exclusion of firm inception, bias observed patterns of corporate criminal careers, such as age of onset, frequency and duration of offending. Another limitation concerns how measurement may influence results. Formal legal responses to offending are culled from different sources and reflect different detection mechanisms and capabilities. Regulatory inspection data, for instance, typically rely on compliance checklists that are compiled during routine visits which indicate whether standards are met or not. Criminal and civil cases, on the other hand, tend to rely on other processes that

bring violations to the attention of prosecutors. Criminal data, in particular, will capture more serious violations compared to the other data sources. Additionally, Simpson et al. (2007) point out how the measure of offending, using rates versus counts, and other variables, such as profitability, can change the results of a study. Moving forward, research should examine more explicitly how data and measurement choices shape empirical conclusions about corporate offending. Key questions include how different enforcement data sources reflect distinct detection mechanisms (Stafford 2022), how the use of counts versus rates alters observed offending patterns and whether relationships between offending and firm characteristics depend on the severity thresholds embedded in specific measurements. Further, as discussed in the results section on crime mix, the majority of articles we assessed examined corporate illegal behavior and violations in general rather than specific types of offending; and nearly all determined illegality based on whether any formal legal decisions or enforcement actions were taken against a company, meaning the extent of actual corporate offending is unknown. In addition, the kind of violation may matter when examining predictors or correlates of corporate offending. Only four studies explicitly mentioned the potential importance of the type of violation examined for its relationship to other variables (Baucus and Near 1991; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Simpson 1986; Simpson and Koper 1997). For instance, Baucus and Near (1991) acknowledge that simply determining if certain factors are related to corporate crime does not account for whether these factors only matter, or are more influential, for specific kinds of offending. They find that how certain variables relate to illegal activities may depend upon the type of violation examined. McKendall and Wagner (1997), Simpson (1986), and Simpson and Koper (1997) find that the seriousness of a violation results in different effects, affirming the relevance of violation type in corporate crime research of this kind. One suggestion for analyzing generalization versus specialization in offending in previous corporate crime research is to calculate a diversity index, as performed by Meester, Kluin, Blokland, and Huisman (2025). Using data from a study not included in our analysis because it did not meet our 5 year criterion (Clinard and Yeager 1980), Meester and associates calculated diversity scores for violations of 582 corporations across 14 different industries. A total of 1415 violations in six different legislation types were studied. The diversity index scores reveal that, in most industries, offending is generalized. Diversity is lowest in the oil refining ($D=0.42$) and metal manufacturing industries ($D=0.42$) and highest in the apparel ($D=0.94$) and metal products industries ($D=0.95$). The diversity index could be a useful way to extrapolate information on crime mix from previous corporate crime research. Future research could examine whether applying a diversity index to corporate crime data yields new insights into the composition and complexity of corporate crime mix beyond what is captured by traditional frequency measures, and assess whether such information could support regulatory enforcement agencies in identifying corporations that pose heightened or multifaceted compliance risks.

In addition, most studies ignore other potential sources of crime prevention and control beyond the impact of legal interventions and sanctions such as Board of Directors or top management team characteristics, reputational damage, internal compliance mechanisms, and the role of third party stakeholders (Ayers and

Braithwaite 1992; Layana 2022; Simpson et al. 2020). Of these, the panel studies in our review were more likely to examine the influence of corporate governance structures, but it was still relatively rare (20%).

Given these limitations, several studies conclude that more longitudinal research is needed (Alalehto 2010; Asch and Seneca 1976; Kluin et al. 2018, 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, and Huisman 2025; Meester, Kluin, Blokland, Huisman, Schuur, and Wassenburg 2025; Orudzheva et al. 2020; Simpson et al. 2025), pointing to the constrained nature of research in the corporate crime area. Another common observation emphasizes the multifaceted predictors of corporate offending and that different combinations of characteristics had different levels of predictive power (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Baucus and Near 1991; Block et al. 2006; McKendall and Wagner 1997; Mishina et al. 2010; Orudzheva et al. 2020). Others highlighted the limitations of their data, in particular asking whether certain companies have a greater record of illegal behavior because they are prone to such behavior or because these companies are prosecuted more (Asch and Seneca 1975, 1976; Prechel and Zheng 2016). These are not intractable problems, but they call attention to issues that should be addressed and/or managed in future longitudinal studies on corporate offending. The criminal career paradigm was developed with individuals in mind. Using *existing* longitudinal data and studies to test criminal career dimensions may be overly optimistic. As mentioned earlier, existing corporate crime data are not designed to measure the core constructs of criminological theories, especially theories that are multi-level and that simultaneously take into consideration corporate control and governance structures. This suggests that more work needs to be done to build symbiosis between micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. While the criminal career paradigm encompasses other potential dimensions, this narrative review focused on its foundational components to provide a clear and coherent framework for systematic comparison across studies. In the future, research could productively extend this framework by incorporating other aspects, for example persistence and desistance (Piquero, Moffitt and Wright 2007) and by focusing more on offense severity and diversity, which we were not able to explore in-depth due to limitations in the studies examined.

Our approach provides a unique and fruitful path to understanding corporate crime offending generally and elements of a corporate criminal career specifically, allowing us to see how longitudinal corporate crime research can provide important insights that are not accessible using cross-sectional work alone. Some of our findings, however, do not fit neatly within the basic four criminal career dimensions (e.g., the inconsistent impact of company size and age on participation and career duration, industry/market differences) or they are associated with more than just one dimension. We have speculated about potential sources of the inconsistencies including inadequate data and measurement variations and have argued that an organizational life-cycle approach can offer insights into these patterns—specifically by linking developmental stages (inception, growth, maturity, and decline) to corporate offender characteristics. However, the findings may point toward other multi-level mechanisms that affect patterns of corporate offending such as corporate culture, climate, and toxicity, (Van Rooij and Fine 2018), situational

factors (Lord and Levi 2025); and/or macro-structural environmental influences including enforcement policies that impact offense detection (Barak 2017; Simpson 1987). While future research will require a more thorough investigation of corporate crime offending through an organizational life-cycle and criminal career lens, we can begin to understand the benefits of these perspectives through the work examined here. Moreover, the studies from this review reveal important considerations to be made by scholars using longitudinal data to examine corporate crime offending or illegality as well as areas ripe for further investigation. Future research should leverage the benefits of longitudinal research and the criminal career paradigm as a means for deepening our understanding of these issues and acknowledging the importance of history, time, place, and development for corporate offenders.

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Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ Criminologically focused US-based studies, among others, include the Cambridge-Somerville Study, 1936; the Glueck Study, 1939–1963; Philadelphia Cohort Studies, 1945 and 1958; National Youth Survey, 1976; NLSY 1979; Pittsburgh Youth Study, 1987–1988; Rochester Youth Development Study—RYDS 1987–1988; Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, 1994–1999.

² Alternatives to formal legal measures of corporate offending (e.g., self reports and victimization surveys) are extremely rare and fraught with measurement problems. Official crime data also are problematic in that they underestimate the hidden figure of crime. As noted by Simpson and Yeager (2014, 26), “Crime data always and everywhere bear measurement limitations. This is because of the barriers to public visibility of so much offending, barriers that are rooted in the desires of perpetrators—and too often victims as well—to avoid detection, and in the routine professional and bureaucratic processes of law enforcement. The challenges to good measurement are only magnified for the offenses of corporations. As a result both research and public policy are handicapped in their efforts to comprehend and respond effectively to this very costly pattern of behavior.” However, unlike traditional crime which relies on criminal justice enforcement, corporate crime indicators draw from multiple data sources (regulators, criminal, and civil prosecutions). We consider this a strength for research on the corporate criminal career. The mix of source information can reveal important details about whether the company learns from its mistakes or continues to offend even when previous guidance, warnings, or sanctions have been noncriminal. The data also are instructive about patterns of misconduct (within and between enforcement

types), including clustering, escalation, seriousness, and enforcement actions. For instance, federal prosecutors take regulatory and civil enforcement actions into consideration as part of the corporate criminal history when considering whether to bring criminal charges against a firm.

³For instance, company size may be associated with the overall number of firm transactions, employee contacts with suppliers and vendors, expansion into multiple product markets, and so on.

⁴Longitudinal studies can take many forms, including repeat cross-sectional, prospective, and retrospective designs. For more information about different design strategies and variations, see (Farrington 2006; Roberts and Horney 2010; Yee and Niemeier 1996).

⁵While our goal was to identify longitudinal data sets in the corporate crime field, our search necessarily focused on articles that used the data as part of a study.

⁶Among individuals, studies also have identified different onset groups in the general population, specifically individuals who initiate as juveniles, adolescents, and adults. Although contested, some studies suggest that each group has unique risk factors associated with onset and they demonstrate distinct offense patterns by type, seriousness, and duration.

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